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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at Rockland Community College (New York) to determine the adequacy of the reading criterion that determined entry into its intensive freshman English classes from the college skills program, a developmental program designed to improve skills in communication, mathematics, reading, and studying. A group of 746 freshman English students and 627 college skills students was tested with Form A of the Nelson Denny Reading Test. Results indicated that the college skills program's exit criterion--grade 11 equivalent scores on the test--was sufficient for admission into extensive English. Scores of the combined introductory English classes were significantly higher than those of the college skills students, however. Nonetheless, some high scoring college skills students could be placed in regular English classes rather than the intensive class. Unexpectedly, advanced college skills students scored significantly higher than the intensive introductory English students on vocabulary, comprehension, and total score. (DF)

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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE READING LEVELS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTRODUCTORY ENGLISH AND COLLEGE SKILLS STUDENTS

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"The American community college was designed to provide an opportunity for higher education for all persons... To make this open admissions policy viable, reading and study skill programs are a necessity. Without them, the open door would become a revolving door for the marginal student." (Aron 1978) Skills programs are not only a necessity, but as Grant and Hoeber (1978) report, courses in basic skills are now an established part of the community college, junior college and four year college curriculum. (Monteith 1978)

Rockland Community College's College Skills program has been in existence for fourteen years. The core courses consist of communication skills, math skills, a clinical skills module and reading and study improvement. A student enrolled in the skills program is required to meet various exit criteria before pursuing many courses in the college mainstream. Competence in reading is determined by the student's performance on the Nelson Denny Reading Test (Form A), which consists of vocabulary and comprehension subtests. In order to enroll in introductory English 101 and other mainstream courses, a Skills student must achieve a minimum of an 11.0 grade equivalent (raw score = 56) as measured by this instrument, in addition to demonstrating writing competence. The main purpose of developmental education programs is to improve such skills sufficiently for the student to succeed in College. College is

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a competitive environment. Grades are frequently determined by a classroom curve. In order to succeed, the student cannot afford to be at the low end of the grade distribution. If an exit criterion is too lax, the student is likely to fail soon after entering the college mainstream. If it is too stringent, the student may become frustrated, lose interest and withdraw from school before entering the mainstream of the college. In each case a disservice would be rendered to the student, and the college attrition statistics would increase. It is therefore crucial for the student and for the college, to establish realistic exit criteria. Skills students who fulfill reading and writing exit requirements are usually enrolled into Intensive English 101. While the two forms of the English 101 course are each designed to develop writing skills, the "Intensive" course differs from "Regular" English 101 in the following ways:

1. Intensive English has more individual instruction than Regular English.
2. Intensive English moves at a slower pace than Regular English.
3. Intensive English focuses on smaller units of writing than does Regular English.
4. Intensive English characteristically has a smaller class size than Regular English.
5. Intensive English employs easier instructional materials than does Regular English.

Intensive English is essentially comprised of three groups of students: students from the College Skills program; students from the English as a Foreign Language program; and students who were not in either developmental program but, as indicated by the English Placement Exam and by high school transcripts, were determined to be generally weak in English language skills.

The present study is designed to assess the adequacy of the current reading criterion for exit from the College Skills program and entry into English 101. Reading scores

of Intensive and Regular English 101 students, upon entry into these courses, will be examined in reference to the College Skills exit criterion (11.0 grade equivalent). Comparisons of the reading skills of English and College Skills students will be made. Reading strengths and weaknesses are to be examined. Finally, it is within the purview of the present study to evaluate the adequacy of English students' reading skill development.

METHOD

Testing was conducted at the beginning of the Fall semester. Form A of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test was administered to the following groups:

GROUP	TOTAL N	NUMBER OF CLASSES	% of TOTAL CLASSES	METHOD OF SELECTION
English 101	267	13	31	Random and Systematic
Intensive	55	3	75	Systematic
Regular	212	10	26	Random
Day	154	7	23	Random
Night	58	3	38	Random
College Skills	209	12	100	Systematic
Beginning	158	-	100	Systematic
Advanced	51	-	100	Systematic
Day	166	9	100	Systematic
Night	43	3	100	Systematic

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Issue: Is the College Skills reading exit policy realistic? The central problem underlying this research project is to assess the adequacy of the current reading criterion required for passage from the Skills program into English 101. As indicated by the results, the College Skills reading exit criterion, a total raw score of 56 (11.0 grade equivalent), is an appropriate criterion for entry into Intensive English,

however it would not be an adequate criterion for entry into Regular English 101. The mean total raw score of Intensive English students was 51 (10.3 grade equivalent); the mean total raw score of Regular English students was 69 (12.6 grade equivalent). (Table I) On the bases of the results obtained, one may conclude that the current Skills reading exit criterion is sufficiently stringent to provide Skills students with a reasonable opportunity for success in Intensive English. The present results may also serve as a framework for specifying a reading criterion for entry into the regular English course. College Skills students who exit with a total reading score of 69 or more, and whose writing skills are adequately developed, may be appropriately advised to enroll in Regular English 101. Concommitant with exit from College Skills and passage into English 101, is entry into other college mainstream courses. Therefore the question is raised as to whether exiting Skills students, whom we will assume to be reading at the 11th grade level, will have the requisite skills to compete effectively with other students in the college mainstream. If, as the results suggest, former Skills students will be enrolled in courses with regular mainstream students, whose mean reading level is a year and a half in grade equivalents above theirs, then it is possible that the former Skills students may have difficulty successfully competing with many of their classmates, especially in courses which require substantial reading. Recommendations for reading support procedures will be discussed later in this paper.

Issue: How do the reading skills of College Skills students compare with those of Intensive and Regular English students?

College Skills students are divided into two groups on the basis of their reading scores. "Beginning" Skills students are defined as those whose total reading scores are less than or equal to 48 (grade equivalent= 9.9). "Advanced" Skills students are defined as students whose total reading scores are more than or equal to 49 (grade equivalent = 10.0) Data which reflects the scores of both Beginning and Advanced Skills students if referred to as "Combined Skills".

A comparative analysis of the combined English data and the combined Skills data shows

that the vocabulary, comprehension and total reading scores of the English students were significantly higher than those of the College Skills students. (Table 2) An examination of the total score grade equivalents of the two groups concretizes the difference between the groups. English students were reading at the 12.2 level while College Skills students were reading at the 8.8 level. The results show that both English subgroups, Regular and Intensive students, scored higher than the combined College Skills students on each of the three variables. (Table 1)

There were statistically significant differences between Combined College Skills students and Intensive English students in vocabulary, comprehension and the total score. (Results of the tests are presented in Table 2). The results indicate that Intensive English students have better developed reading skills than the Combined College Skills students. Analyses of the Beginning Skills and Intensive English students showed that the latter scored significantly higher than the former on all three variables. (Table 2) However, a comparative analyses of the Intensive and Advanced College Skills Students provided unanticipated and striking results. Advanced College Skills students scored significantly higher than the Intensive English students on vocabulary, comprehension and the total score. (Table 2) The mean total grade equivalents of Advanced Skills students and Intensive students were 11.6 and 10.3 respectively. (Table 1) Although the obtained pattern of results was the reversal of the pattern expected, one should not infer as appropriate, a corresponding reversal in placement of these students. Reading level is only one of the criteria for exit from College Skills and entry into English 101. Writing competence is of at least equal importance in determining placement into Intensive English. The presence of relatively high level readers in the College Skills program is probably a function of the need of these students to improve their writing skills before entering the college mainstream. Reciprocally, low level readers in the Intensive English courses were probably placed there on the basis of having exhibited relatively highly developed writing skills.

Analyses of the Intensive and Regular English 101 scores showed that the students differed significantly in vocabulary, comprehension and the total score. (Table 2) In each case, Regular English students scored higher than the Intensive students. The mean total grade equivalent of the Regular English students was two years and three months higher than that of the Intensive students. (Table 1). This pattern of significant differences between the groups was consistent when the data for Regular day and night students were analyzed separately and compared with Intensive students. While currently there is a national concern that college students have difficulty reading, the 12.6 mean total grade equivalent of the Regular English students suggests that Rockland Community College students, in general, are relatively competent readers. However, the data suggests that the reading skills of students in the Intensive English courses are not commensurate with college level requirements and expectations. Why were the Intensive students' reading scores so low? The following list consists of possible interpretations and explanations of the depressed reading scores of Intensive English students.

1. At testing, students were asked to report their native language. Sixty-seven percent of the Intensive English students reported this information. Thirty percent of these students indicated that they were not native speakers of English. Students, for whom English is a foreign language, may have contributed substantially to the significant differences between Intensive and Regular English students, especially on the vocabulary subtest. A deficient English vocabulary may be a function of simple translation, or may reflect the more serious problem of inadequate language development in the students' native language. This is an issue which merits further examination.

2. Students exiting from the English As a Foreign Language program are required to score a minimum of a 10.0 grade equivalency on the more advance Form C of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. It is possible that this criterion is not stringent enough. However, since only about 6% of the Intensive students in the present study were previously enrolled in the E F L program, the E F L reading criterion cannot adequately account for the low scores of the Intensive students.

3. College Skills students who enter Intensive English are required to score a minimum total of 56 on Form A of the Nelson-Denny (grade equivalent 11.0). Achievement motivation, and consequently test performance at exit may reflect the peak of students' reading performance, because students are aware of the importance of the reading score in determining whether or not they can enroll in mainstream courses. Having enrolled in Intensive English, achievement motivation, as it pertains to the reading test, may decrease and test performance may drop, not reflecting the students' maximal competence. Only 8% of the Intensive students were formerly enrolled in College Skills. Thus while the comparative levels of reading test achievement motivation may have contributed towards the low performance of Intensive English students, it cannot completely account for the results.

4. Examination of the transcripts of Intensive English students showed that the 14% who were previously enrolled in the developmental programs, College Skills and E F L, usually waited one semester before taking Intensive English. If these students avoided taking courses which emphasize reading during the intervening semester, it is possible that they did not sufficiently practice and utilize their reading skills, thereby negatively affecting their performance on the Nelson-Denny in the present study.

5. Eighty-six percent of the Intensive English students were not previously enrolled in developmental or remedial courses. On the bases of the present results, one may conjecture that a number of these students had a reading problem which was not detected upon entrance to the college. That is, students who would have been more appropriately placed in a developmental program may have been misplaced into Intensive English, perhaps because of a lack of sufficient information from which proper placement could be derived.

6. Intensive English students, in general, may have demonstrated a relatively low level of reading performance if they did not exercise their reading skills during the summer months which preceded the present study.

Recommendations for supplementary placement strategies and for compensating for reading skill deficiencies will be discussed later in this paper.

Issue: How do the reading skills of day and night students compare to each other?

A comparison of the reading scores of day and night students enrolled in College Skills and Regular English 101 indicates that Advanced Skills and Regular English night students obtained higher vocabulary and total mean scores than their daytime counterparts. (Table 3) This pattern of results contrasts with that obtained for the Beginning Skills students. Subtest and total scores of day students tended to be higher than those of the night students. (Table 3) This trend reversal may indicate that severely educationally disadvantaged students comprise a distinct group with unique characteristics, problems and needs which are atypical of the more "traditional" students. Comprehension scores of day students were slightly higher than those of the night students in each of the three groups. This difference may be a function of the time of testing, it may reflect a genuine difference in the comprehension skills of the respective students, or it may be a chance result.

Issue: What are the relative strengths and weaknesses in the reading skills of English and College Skills students?

Nelson-Denny subtest data, which encompasses vocabulary and comprehension skills, can be utilized to pinpoint or suggest areas of relative strength and weakness in reading. A consitent pattern of results was observed both within and between the groups. Beginning and Advanced College Skills students, and Intensive and Regular English students all obtained higher grade equivalent scores in vocabulary than in comprehension. (Table 1) While it is possible that this consistent pattern of results is an artifact of the nature of the test, i.e. it may reflect a difference in subtest difficulty, the data suggest that students are relatively adept at deciphering word meanings, but have difficulty deploying higher order skills, such as inferencing, interpretation, evaluation and application, which are involved in and required for reading comprehension.

The mean difference between grade equivalents of vocabulary and comprehension scores of the four groups was one year and one month. The discrepancy was largest for the Beginning College Skills students (vocabulary = 8.8, comprehension = 7.3, mean difference = 1.5) and smallest for Regular English students (vocabulary= 12.7, comprehension = 12.2, mean difference = .5). This pattern of results (see Table 4) suggests that there may be a relationship between general reading competence and specific subskill competence variability. It may be the case that, within limits, as one increases general reading competence, (operationally defined here by Regular English students' data in comparison to Beginning Skills students' data) there is a correlative decrease in the difference between reading subskill competence. That is, an improvement in general reading strength may be accompanied by a reduction in specific reading skill weakness.

Recommendations for Placement Procedures and Reading Skill Development

As previously indicated, the results showed that there were significant differences between Regular and Intensive English students in both vocabulary and comprehension. Intensive students were deficient in these skills when compared to Regular English students. It was also reported that Intensive English students were significantly weaker in these skill areas than were Advanced College Skills students. Students who were enrolled in Intensive English were reading below the expected level. (Expected level is defined as an 11.0 grade equivalent, vis a vis the College Skills reading exit criterion). Intensive students are simultaneously enrolled in other mainstream college courses, competing with Regular English students, and are likely to experience frustration and difficulty, if not failure. What then should be done in order to improve their reading skills and make college a rewarding and successful experience? The results indicate there is a need for revision of the Intensive English placement procedures. Students who were not previously enrolled in developmental programs but are recommended to take the Intensive course on the basis of high school transcripts

and English Placement Exams, should be routinely administered the Nelson-Denny in order to determine whether they would more appropriately be placed in the College Skills program because of reading skill deficiencies. A reading criterion level, such as College Skills' grade equivalent 11.0 should be specified. Criterion testing for mainstreaming developmental students may be more appropriately conducted at the beginning of the projected mainstream entry semester than at the end of the preceding semester. Testing all students upon entry into Intensive English should ameliorate the problem of improper placement and should help ensure that Intensive English students are reading at the expected level.

If the Intensive English reading criterion is substantially lower than the observed Regular English 101 reading level (12.6 grade equivalent), then Intensive students may still have difficulty competing with students in mainstream courses, especially those which involve cumbersome reading assignments. Changes in curricula and instructional objectives may be necessary in order to compensate for the Intensive/Mainstream (defined by Regular English) reading level discrepancy and to maximize the Intensive students' opportunities for a successful and rewarding college experience.

Reading support systems can be incorporated into Intensive English by either alternative or complementary strategies. Within classroom reading instruction can be integrated into the Intensive English course and thereby constitute a more wholistic approach to language skill development. Workbooks containing vocabulary and comprehension exercises can be used as supplementary texts, and text content can serve as the springboard for writing assignments. Teacher training workshops, conducted by a reading specialist, should be instituted to provide Intensive English instructors with the requisite knowledge for developing word attack and comprehension skills of their students. Auxillary reading courses could accompany Intensive English and be required either uniformly or for systematically selected students. Auxillary courses

could assume the form of a clinical module or a reading center, analogous in structure and function; to the writing center to which intensive students are currently referred. An increasingly prevalent approach to improving reading skills would involve the college faculty operating as a team and should be considered. Content area instructors could supply the English department (and College Skills) with a list of vocabulary words and concepts with which students consistently experience difficulty. These items could be incorporated into the Intensive English and/or auxillary course curriculum. Reciprocally, the college faculty could be alerted to the reading problems of Intensive English students and be encouraged to integrate reading skill development into their content area courses. Monteith (1978), Chaplin (1978), Currie (1978) and Aron (1978) all emphasize the importance of integrating skill development into the college curriculum. As Chaplin (1978) notes, reading is a "necessary concommitant to all academic instruction". If this approach were to be pursued, teacher training workshops would be desirable. At the very least, the faculty should be sensitive to the issue of reading deficiencies and should refer students with observed reading problems to a tutor or to an auxillary reading course or center. Currie (1978) argues that even the "more able students" should know about and be encouraged to enroll in reading programs. Future research should be directed towards evaluating Intensive English students' improvement in reading through the course of the semester, comparing progress in classes conducted with and without reading instruction.

As stated earlier, the results indicate that each of the groups is relatively more proficient in vocabulary than comprehension. Consequently, reading skill development, in both College Skills and English, should focus on the ability of students to organize information, make inferences, utilize contextual cues and understand relationships between ideas.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

One may raise the issue of whether College Skills and English 101 students really

constitute different populations in terms of reading competence. The highly significant differences in the reading levels of the two groups indicates that the populations are in fact distinct. The results therefore substantiate the legitimacy of an independent College Skills program. The present research indicates that the current College Skills reading exit policy constitutes an appropriate criterion for entry into Intensive English. Data from this study could be utilized to extrapolate a reading criterion for entry into Regular English 101. Across the board, students reflected a relative strength in vocabulary skills and a relative weakness in comprehension. While the results suggest that Regular English students were reading at an adequate level, Intensive students exhibited a particular need for improvement in reading. Recommendations for alteration of placement procedures and instruction were discussed.

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Table 1 - Raw Scores and Grade Equivalents

GROUP	N	VOCABULARY		COMPREHENSION		TOTAL	
		RAW	G.E.	RAW	G.E.	RAW	G.E.
Combined College Skills	209	17	9.4	21	8.2	38	8.8
Beginning College Skills	158	14	8.8	17	7.3	31	7.9
Advanced College Skills	51	27	12.2	33	10.9	60	11.6
Combined English	267	30	12.5	35	11.5	65	12.2
Intensive English	55	23	11.0	28	9.8	51	10.3
Regular English	212	32	12.7	37	12.2	69	12.6

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TABLE 2

STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GROUPS:

2 TAILED t TESTS

t values and probabilities

COMPARISON GROUPS	VOCABULARY		COMPREHENSION		TOTAL	
	t	p<	t	p<	t	p<
Combined English x Combined Skills	13.30	.001	14.27	.001	15.05	.001
Intensive English x Combined Skills	4.48	.001	4.82	.001	5.15	.001
Intensive English x Advanced Skills	3.02	.005	2.70	.01	3.48	.001
Intensive English x Beginning Skills	7.29	.001	6.84	.001	8.15	.001
Intensive English x Regular English	6.52	.001	4.94	.001	6.53	.001
Beginning Skills x Advanced Skills	13.53	.001	14.67	.001	16.92	.001

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TABLE 3

DAY AND NIGHT STUDENTS

RAW SCORES AND GRADE EQUIVALENTS

GROUP	N	VOCABULARY		COMPREHENSION		TOTAL	
		RAW	G.E.	RAW	G.E.	RAW	G.E.
Regular English - Day	154	30	12.5	37	12.2	67	12.4
Regular English - Night	58	37	13.3	36	11.9	72	12.8
Beginning College Skills - Day	119	14	8.8	18	7.5	32	8.1
Beginning College Skills - Night	39	12	8.3	14	-7.0	27	7.5
Advanced College Skills - Day	47	27	12.2	33	10.9	59	11.4
Advanced College Skills - Night	4	32	12.7	31	10.5	63	12.0

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TABLE 4

DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN GRADE EQUIVALENTS OF VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

GROUP	MEAN DISCREPANCY : GRADE EQUIVALENTS
Beginning College Skills	1.5
Advanced College Skills	1.3
Intensive English	1.2
Regular English	.5

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